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David Simpson. The Politics of American English, 1776-1850

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REVIEWS

David Simpson. *The Politics of American English, 1776-1850*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986. 301 pp. \$24.95

Though Simpson's book adduces many opinions about the emerging American language from minor writers (especially from the first decades of the nineteenth century), he articulates his primary argument around the differing and distinctive views on language of three authors: Noah Webster, James Fenimore Cooper, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Webster promoted his version of an American language to embody his Federalist proclivities for set standards of established best usage. The dramatized tensions of Cooper's fiction turn, at least in part, on the novelist's acute and sensitive awareness of the social context of the speech of his characters, whose dialect usages he labored to register accurately—in opposition to Webster's purging of such forms. In further contrast, Emerson and the Transcendentalists conceived an idealized American language, harmonious and integrated under a universal selfhood purged of the social tensions Cooper sought to portray.

Though some specifics of Webster's program changed in the course of his long career, his goal remained to shape an American language purified from the corruption of eighteenth-century British commerce, politics, and theater. Dialect usages preserved varying and illicit forms, and exacerbated difficulties of pronouncing written forms; such usages ought to be shunned as sub-standard. To make the written language available to all, spelling should always conform to pronunciation, no matter the historical provenance of the form. Thus in the name of standardizing a pure American tongue, Webster advocated his well-known spelling reforms: terminal "or" instead of "our," "center" instead of "centre," and the deletion of silent forms like terminal "e" and the "k" on "ick" forms. (Other intended "reforms" like the suppression of the silent "gh" in "ough" of course never took). In tracing Webster's views and controversies, Simpson usefully foregrounds the never-distant political program: Webster sought to formulate an American language congruent with his view of the usages of pure Anglo-Saxon, anti-Whiggish yeomen, the presumed natural supporters of Webster's own Federalism.

Simpson recognizes the seriousness of Cooper's concern for language, both as a novelist and as a political thinker. Cooper parted company with the New England Webster not only over specific usages (Cooper always relished dialect, for instance), but also over the uniformitarian political program lurking in Webster's writings. Like Webster, Cooper advocated an American English which rejected a fawning dependence on British taste and whim (see his *Notions of the Americans* and the successive introductions to *The Spy*). Simpson

writes with sympathetic insight of Cooper's career-long quest to dramatize the "struggle and conflict within the social contract" (p. 251). By taking Cooper seriously as a writer, he illuminates Cooper's sometimes cluttered but always determined effort to forge a social and political philosophy which grasped and contained the observed diversity of American democracy. Simpson is equally useful in explaining the context for Natty Bumppo's vocabulary, and in rehearsing Cooper's sources and intentions for other non-standard speakers, especially his Indians.

In the implications of Transcendentalist thought for the American language, Simpson sees a diminution of the richness of tongues Cooper observed and imagined. Where Cooper saw tense conflict, Emerson and his followers saw a uniform language mirroring a harmonious society:

Transcendentalism...is founded on the paradigm of the universal selfhood, the exemplary ego that subsumes (as it offers to represent) all other egos into its normative modality. It dissolves also any observed or theorized tension between man and nature, now brought into harmony under the benign gaze of an omnipresent God. As such, Transcendentalism avoids or obscures the very questions that Cooper's fictions have been argued to project and analyze—questions about the differences and tensions between the various elements in the social contract (which may be so wide as to be tragically unsolvable), and about the widening gap between the increasing needs of the human community and the integrity of spoiled nature. (pp. 230-231)

Simpson wisely urges us not to accept uncritically the assumptions made from Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* through Ziff's *Literary Democracy* that a true American language and literature originates with Emerson. Simpson reminds us that we still too often fail to weigh Cooper's contributions to establishing an independent American culture along side the program of the Transcendentalists.

The Politics of American English is a valuable overview of recent work on the formation of the national language. The close readings of Cooper's fiction, with the resulting density of detail on his disposition of language, is especially rewarding. (As an editor of the SUNY edition of *The Pioneers*, I found his twenty pages devoted to the first of the *Leather Stocking Tales* first-rate critical use of textual research.) Indeed, Simpson's enthusiasm for setting Cooper up against the Transcendentalists leads to his only obtuse point: arguing that words for Natty Bumppo (unlike Emerson) are arbitrary counters created as social conveniences, and thus always descriptive, never imaginative.

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Simpson apparently forgets the flights of poetry of the young Natty in *The Deerslayer*, to which some readers (like D. H. Lawrence) have responded with ardor.

Reading Simpson is a joy. His theses are clearly stated, and extensive historical research effortlessly marshalled. The political issues he examined are skillfully woven into the fabric of the argument. And Simpson's own prose style is a triumph: a matrix of British academic prose spiked with the energy of American locutions and idioms—American English at its best.

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Edgar Allan Poe. *Poetry and Tales*, ed. Patrick F. Quinn. New York: The Library of America, 1984. 1408 pp. \$27.50

Edgar Allan Poe. *Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson. New York: The Library of America, 1984. 1544 pp. \$27.50

Two thousand nine hundred and fifty-two pages of Poe. What a lot of Poe for only \$55.00—less than two cents a page. These two handsome volumes in the Library of America series do indeed rival the famous *Pléiade* editions of French classical authors in heft and feel, in typeface and binding (complete with maroon ribbon bookmark), not to mention quality of editing.

Both volumes have been edited with care and intelligence, with the convenience of the reader obviously in mind. For example, Quinn includes the illustrations to the four "plate articles": "Some Account of Stonehenge, the Giant's Dance," "The Island of the Fay," "Morning on the Wissahiccon," and "Byron and Miss Chaworth," thereby making a lot more sense out of these pieces by providing the context.

For his splendid *Essays and Reviews* volume Thompson has used the original source for almost all of them. He includes over 125 out of the nearly 1000 pieces that Poe printed (and reprinted) during his lifetime in one volume that easily fits into the hand. What a pleasure not to have to refer so often to those seventeen little volumes of the 1902 Harrison edition, with its inconvenient index. This is a real boon to all but the most specialized scholar, and a revelation to the General Reader for whom presumably the entire series is being published. These 1500 pages of essays, reviews, marginalia, etc. on a variety of subjects, may at last convince her or him that Poe was not just a writer of spooky stories. Here is the whole of Poe before us at last in a readable and (considering the price of books these days) affordable form.